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Lindsey

The causes of
unemployment

[S.I.]

[1908]

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AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR
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131 East 23rd St.
NEW YORK, N. Y.

a-7 THE CAUSÉS
OF
UNEMPLOYMENT.

AN ADDRESS
TO THE
SCHOLARS OF THE TRADES TRAINING SCHOOLS,
AT THE
DISTRIBUTION OF PRIZES
(Session 1907-1908),
CARPENTERS' HALL, LONDON WALL, E.C.,
ON
Wednesday, December 9th, 1908,
BY
SIR GUILFORD MOLESWORTH,
K.C.I.E., M.Inst.C.E.

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BY

SIR GUILFORD MOLESWORTH, K.C.I.E., M.Inst.C.E.

SIR GUILFORD MOLESWORTH: I feel it a very great privilege and a very great pleasure to have been invited to attend here and distribute the prizes this evening. It is a privilege because it has been the means of enabling me to visit the Trades' Training Schools, to gain an insight into their working, to examine the high standard of workmanship, and also to appreciate their admirable organisation. It is a pleasure because I so thoroughly sympathise with the aims and objects of that institution, which are to combine designing with the practical execution of work, to elevate the dignity of labour, to raise the standard of workmanship and the status of the working man, and to give him an interest in his work. (Cheers.)

I do not envy the man who takes no interest or pride in his work. Such a man is little better than a slave. The very essence of a happy, contented life, is that it should be a busy one devoted to matters outside self. A selfish idle, luxurious existence brings with it weariness, disgust; and a distaste of life; and I pity the poor rich idler who suffers from that worst of evils, "the-nothing-to-do-complaint." I always think that the occupation of a working man is very far preferable, both as regards

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healthiness and interest in his work, to that of the man who has to drudge over dull figures in a stuffy office. (Hear, hear.)

Speaking from personal experience I may say my life has been a long one, and a varied one, and I may say a happy one; but no portion of it has been more happy than that in which I was working at the bench as a millwright and engine fitter, with the struggles of life before me. (Applause.) Now I think that our present system of education is extremely defective in that it sacrifices technical to scholastic education. (Hear, hear.) The policy seems to be to cram the student with a smattering of all sorts of subjects which are too often forgotten soon after leaving school, and are no earthly use to him afterwards (hear, hear), instead of giving a good, sound, solid, elementary education, and teaching him a trade. (Hear, hear.) We are therefore bringing up a large portion of our population without any definite training for future employment, unskilled, useless for industrial purposes, and forming a recruiting ground for those already too large classes of the unemployed, of the loafer, and of the hooligan. (Hear, hear.) Every man ought to learn a trade (hear, hear), but unfortunately the old system of apprenticeship is fast dying out, with nothing coming forward to take its place, and for this reason it is impossible to overrate the very great advantages of the Trades' Training Schools.

Now, formerly the British workman was the pride and the strength of the nation, and I still think that British labour is the best in the world (hear, hear), if it were only free and untrammeled. (Applause.) But I see it is deteriorating, becoming slip-shod and inefficient, under the influence of those who reduce workmanship and workmen to one dead level of mediocrity, and limit the output of labour. (Cheers.) I refer to those Societies or Unions which threaten their members with expulsion if they do more than a very, very moderate day's work; also to those so-called labour leaders who tell the working-man that it is to his interest to get as much money and do as little work for it as possible. Now, I say that such advice is perfectly suicidal in these days of keen foreign competition (applause); and this leads me to speak of a very vital matter, and that is unemployment.

The unemployed claim the right to labour, but I would ask you to consider how far the working-men, as a class, are responsible for contributing to the scarcity of employment by urging or supporting those measures which

have caused it. (Hear, hear.) Now there can be no doubt that unfair and unlimited foreign competition has ruined several o' our industries (hear, hear), whilst many others are struggling hard for existence. (Applause.) And while we have so many of our own countrymen unemployed we are practically paying to the foreign workmen some 80 millions of money yearly, which represents the value of labour in those foreign manufactured articles which we import. (Hear, hear.)

But although this is one cause of unemployment there are others which are far more dangerous, because they are indirect in their action, and consequently are generally overlooked by the public, and by our rulers. Now, one of these is the enormous increase of taxation. It is a very common thing to hear working-men say, "Oh, pile it on the rates and taxes where it doesn't affect us." I say it does affect you, vitally. More than twenty years ago Herbert Spencer sounded a warning note against this peril. He pointed out how the enormous and ever-increasing rates and taxes, whether local or imperial, falling, as they did, on the employers of labour, must necessarily be met from the industries of those employers, and, eventually, by the working-men themselves, either in decreased wages or in shortness of employment. Since that time taxation has increased by leaps and bounds: imperial taxation has increased by 75 per cent., and local taxation has increased by 117 per cent., or more than doubled.

Altogether we have had an increase of taxation amounting to 74 million pounds in the last twenty years. Well, we have not to go far to find a striking example of the truth of Herbert Spencer's contention in the fact that Yarrow's great engineering firm has been driven from Poplar by excessive rates and taxes, leaving three thousand unemployed in that borough alone. Now, it is a very common fallacy to suppose that the Income Tax falls chiefly, almost exclusively, on the rich idler. I wish it did, but it does not. (Hear, hear.) An analysis of the Income Tax return shows that a very large quantity, a very large proportion, falls upon industries, businesses, railways, canals, mines, collieries, ironworks, and other employers of labour. A considerable portion falls upon land, tending to increase the ruin of agriculture and to drive agricultural labourers to swell the ranks of the unemployed (hear, hear); while, again, a large portion falls upon houses and buildings, tending to increase rents, which are already far too high, and which press very heavily upon the working-men and the

poor. So that we have altogether between 75 and 80 per cent. of the total income tax falling upon those items which are injurious to the working-man.

But there is another cause of unemployment, and that is the antagonism of labour and capital. Now, it seems strange that in these days of so-called progress and civilisation we should have gravely to combat that antiquated folly which was exposed some two thousand years ago by *Aesop* in his fable of the belly and the members. The fable must be familiar to most of you, but its lesson is so valuable that I am tempted to repeat it for the information of those who may have forgotten it. The members—the hands, arms, legs, feet, and other members being indignant that the belly should remain idle, whilst absorbing and enjoying the fruits of their labour—determined to revolt and to stop the supply of food, with the result that the members themselves began to suffer and pine away; and they then began to discover that the belly was absolutely essential to their very existence; that far from being idle, as they had supposed, it was working in their interest by digesting the food which they brought to it and distributing it to the different members. Now, the interests of capital—the belly—and labour—the members—are inseparable. What injures one injures the other. (Hear, hear.)

Macleod, in his work on Political Economy, has pithily remarked that if a man has not wealth himself, but only his labour to sell, what is most to his advantage? Why, of course, that there should be as many capitalists as possible to compete for his labour. Nothing can be more fatal than the cry against capital, so often, and so unthinkingly uttered. He would be a benefactor to his country who could devise some means of permanent reconciliation of the interests of employer, and employed, and put an end to the internecine wars between capital and labour. (Applause.) Such a benefactor has been found in the person of the late Sir George Livesey, who has proved, on a very large scale, the practicability of establishing the co-partnership of labour and capital in the South Metropolitan Gas Works, by giving the workmen a share in the profits and in the management of the Company. Now, this plan has been in operation for more than 18 years with the best results. There are now 8,000 co-partners holding shares in the Company to the value of £260,000, and each workman has a nice little nest egg, in some cases amounting to several hundred pounds, to which he has not contributed a single

penny. Strikes are a thing of the past, and the relation between employer and employed has been all that could be desired, without a single hitch during the 18 years of the co-partnership, forming a most brilliant contrast to that miserable state of things both for workmen and officers of the Company that existed when the influence of the Gas Workers' Union was predominant. Eleven other Gas Companies, in other parts of England, have followed Sir George Livesey's example, and now within the last few weeks we have Sir Christopher Furness stating that, worn out by worries, by friction, and by losses, which have been entailed, owing to the interference of trades unions, he cannot carry on his large Engineering and Shipbuilding Works on the Tyne, and that he must close them altogether unless the workmen agree to carry on the Works under the co-partnership system.

It has been my lot to pass through a very important strike, that of the Amalgamated Engineers Union, which extended all over Great Britain. At that time I was working as an apprentice engine-fitter in Fairbairn's Works at Manchester; and during the few weeks that elapsed between the notice of the strike and its outbreak, I had every opportunity of discussing the question with the men, among whom the strike was most unpopular. On all sides I heard, "Why cannot they let us alone? We are doing very well as we are; why cannot they let us alone?" The demands of the union were for the abolition of overtime and piece-work; for a reduction of the number of apprentices to be employed in the works, and other demands tending to limit the output of labour. Overtime, being well paid for—half as much again as ordinary time—was very popular with the men, and it was a great boon to men with large families; as for piece-work, it was that which enabled a good workman to rise to the position of a master. (Hear, hear.)

There is a brilliant example of this in my old master, Sir William Fairbairn, who came to Manchester without a penny in his pocket, his only capital was brains and his labour—and very good capital, too. (Hear, hear.) Piece-work enabled him to take on small jobs, and to carry out these petty contracts he established a little workshop of his own. That little workshop grew into four huge engineering establishments; and at the time of his death Sir William was an extremely wealthy man, a Baronet, and Fellow of the Royal Society, loved and respected by all who knew him. (Applause.) I asked a very intelligent workman with whom I was then

intimated, "Why don't you, and men like you, get on the councils of the Union, and influence them for better—you see what mischief they are doing?" He said, "What can we do? When we've done our day's work we like to go home to our wives and families; we don't want to go blethering about the pot-houses, and it is just those pot-house chaps who have got the gift of the gab, who have the say at the Union." This I found to be true; and that those who prated most loudly about the rights and wrongs of the working-man were the idle, dissolute, worthless fellows, and by no means representatives of the true British workman. (Hear, hear.) But the men were bound to the Union—disobedience of their commands entailed expulsion, loss of previous subscriptions, and that which was the hardest to bear of all, the social ostracism of being denounced as blacklegs and skulkers by their mates. So the strike went on, entailing fearful misery on the wives and families of the men, ruin to employers and employed, and terrible loss of trade: until the funds of the Union were exhausted, when the strike collapsed. And well it was that it did, otherwise the trade must have been ruined. As it was the strike enabled the foreigner to get a good grip of it.

Now, forty-six years afterwards, the same Amalgamated Engineers Union, foolishly ignoring the lessons of the past, again tried the same tactics, and with the same results—misery and ruin to all concerned. This time the foreigner has got a still greater grip of the trade. I know, as a fact, that orders to the value of millions, which ought to have been placed in England, were placed on the Continent, and in the United States in consequence of this strike; and I myself had reluctantly to recommend the placing of a large order for locomotives in the United States simply because they were urgently wanted, and the British firms were unable, in consequence of strikes and threatened strikes, to guarantee the delivery of the engines within any reasonable time.

And now I must apologise for having, in my very great interest in these matters, taxed your patience so severely. (Applause and "No, no.") I will conclude by congratulating the Master and Wardens on the great success of their schools; I must congratulate the instructors on the splendid work achieved under their tuition; and I must congratulate the scholars on their sound sense and strength of mind in coming, after the day's work, to avail themselves of the valuable opportunities afforded by the Trades' Training Schools. (Prolonged cheering.)

.. Trades'.. Session 1908-1909.

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